Appetite for Asian Spice
Category : August 1998
Published by Anonymous on Aug. 02, 1998

CUISINE

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South Africans relish their Indian dining options

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Transcending any other cultural considerations, the allure of Asian food wins Indians a welcome seat within diverse communities worldwide, and South Africa is no exception. Traditional Indian food is easily obtainable here, in either elegant or workaday eateries. In fact, new restaurants serving Indian cuisine and other culinary delights from the East continue to spring up all over the country.

Undeniably, relished traditions of cooking and consuming are aspects of the Eastern lifestyle that have been deemed worthy to preserve, but the ethic of vegetarianism has been given lesser priority. Though the majority of Indian restaurants here are non-vegetarian, most do offer vegetarian meals. The Patel's Vegetarian Restaurant is one of the few exclusively vegetarian outlets. In fact, it's virtually a landmark, being over 80 years old. Business is profitable for Patel, though he has reported a recent decline due to an increase in crime in the area. But he is used to ebb and flow and theorizes that as more devotees join Hindu movements that prescribe

vegetarianism, his outlet will profit. Despite senior Patel's hopeful scenario, the number of vegetarians among South Africa's Indian population appears to be rapidly declining. And while the few vegetarian restaurants that already exist are popular, there appears to be little interest in establishing more.

Apart from the meals served at Patel's premises, a huge slice of his sales are generated by his renowned sweetshop, which attracts customers from all parts of KwaZulu Natal. The sweetshop's proprietor, sixty-six-year-old Prem Ratanjee, says, "African patronage of my store has increased as more Africans have adopted Hinduism."

The Jewel of India, which opened in 1996, is located on the ground floor of the Holiday Inn Crown Plaza, one of Durban's posh beachfront hotels. Delectable Eastern aromas greet all who enter this exclusive restaurant, while mellifluous Indian melodies set the aural setting and, to top the ambiance, Indian dancers perform on a strategically located stage. For those who require the ultimate in Indian nostalgia, the Palace Room allows guests to enjoy their royal rations while seated in a circle on the floor.

Mr. Ajit Kanakia, an Indian national from Mumbai and proud owner of the Jewel, explains that his clientele cuts across the racial spectrum of South Africa, and includes numerous overseas tourists. The Jewel's four chefs hail from India, and Kanakia relies on his North Indian menu to keep customers hungry for more. "These foods are extremely versatile and popular all over the world," he asserts. "The meals that we

serve enable South African Indians to reconnect with India by putting them in touch with part of their traditions. At the same time, visiting Indian nationals can feel right at home while traveling afar." Kanakia owns a second Indian restaurant in the Cape.

Echoing Kanakia, Mr. Rajen Frank, manager of Gulzar restaurant which opened in Durban two years ago, notes, "Eastern cuisine is spreading rapidly amongst all South Africans, and there is a ready market for Eastern food throughout the world. Wherever you go, traditional Indian food will always stand out from every other cuisine." The Gulzar serves North and South Indian food, enjoys a racially mixed patronage and hosts Eastern cultural events. "Last year we hosted one segment of the Miss India South Africa pageant," Frank boasts.

Another virtual victual monument is central Durban's Victory Lounge, owned by Mr. Billy Moodley. Perhaps the Lounge's greatest victory has been remaining in existence for 52 years. Once heavily patronized, the restaurant is still as famous for its mouth-watering sweets as it is for its eye-watering curries. "I am here because I love spicy food," patron Malose Manaka, an African from Johannesburg, in the Gauteng province, told Hinduism Today. He adds, "There are also several Indian restaurants in Johannesburg that I visit regularly."

You need not pound the pavement to find a feast. Simply log-on the Web and visit A Touch of Spice restaurant at its award-winning site. It's worth a visit, even if you're not hungry. You may even like to join the food fanatic's on-line Curry Club.

www.southafrica.co.za/spice/